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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted concerning the reduced and limited curricula which tests may represent. Observations were made at 18 different elementary and middle school classrooms in four school districts in central Pennsylvania during the language arts instructional period. All of the teachers were involved in promoting a holistic approach to literacy. Through hours of observation and conversations with the teachers, several themes were recurring: high levels of performance displayed by low ability learners; inadequacies of report cards; and teachers' frustrations about reducing children's learning to a letter grade. A major theme with teachers was how to educate parents and the public about the learning that was occurring in the classroom. Results indicated that teachers were effectively mediating learning activities so their students could become actively involved and owners of their learning. These rich curricula are undocumented because they do not explicitly inform the general public about the highly skilled, sophisticated performances and growth students display through the daily activities they perform. They are unstandardized because there is no handbook with a script for the teachers to repeat back to their students. The main reason for a lack of public knowledge is there is no formal outlet to report learners' performance and learning growth, except grades and test scores which do not capture the richness of the curricula. (Twenty references are attached.) (MG)

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RICH LITERACY CURRICULA:
UNDOCUMENTED AND UNSTANDARDIZED

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Background

Frequently, the general public, parents, and educators, receive information through the media about the status of education. The 1989 governors' summit on education underscored the need to improve and to better account for educational outcomes in the United States. A common theme across the information made public is poor performance on the part of all educational institutions and all educators (e.g. National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983; Newsweek, 1990). From test scores published in local newspapers to national publications all seem to agree that schools and teachers are at fault in adequately educating the nation.

For the classroom teacher and teacher educator, the frequent and depressing reports are disturbing and discouraging. They are but part of the disenfranchisement and disempowering pitches to which educators are constantly exposed. Rarely is the accuracy and comprehensiveness of reports questioned and often education is used as the scapegoat for societal maladies. The nation as a whole and educators in particular need to be concerned about the status of education and its specific outcomes. However, public

reports are often based solely on test scores which represent a very limited sample of the learning outcomes of schools' curricula (e.g. Cole, 1984; Madaus, 1983; Messick, 1981; Shepard, 1990). Teachers, cognizant of the efforts, joys and perils of education know of a world different from the one often portrayed publicly. Nevertheless, the stakes involved both for teachers and students are high and difficult to ignore.

The Problem

Concerned about the reduced and limited curricula which tests may represent (Madaus, 1983; Shepard, 1990), and as part of a larger project on assessment, I set out to observe language arts instruction in public schools in central Pennsylvania. The observations were wholistic in nature and driven by the possibility that classroom instruction is rich and well contextualized. If that is the case, the decontextualized tasks of tests cannot adequately represent students' learning outcomes. Conversely, is instruction in effect minimized to the extent that learners are unable to perform the basic tasks designed to evaluate their skills? (See Madaus, 1983 for a thorough discussion about the controversies surrounding minimum competency testing.

The inadequacies of external tests in measuring the cognitive outcomes of education have been widely debated

in literature and research in testing (e.g. Costa, 1989; Cole, 1984; Frederiksen, 1984; Johnston, 1983, 1984). Amidst controversy, efforts to pursue alternatives are in infancy (Davey, 1989; Hout, 1990; Lytle & Botel, 1990; Wolf, 1989;Wood, 1988) and have low acceptability by the public and decision-makers.

Learning is understood to occur naturally in specific contexts and through a variety of inputs as indicated by the well documented language learning process that occurs early in life. Recent literature in cognition also underscores the importance of context to the content learned or to be learned (Resnick, 1987; The Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990). Learning in this view is not linear, but rather an intricate web of mental information and connections which learners construct through their learning experiences (Shepard, 1990). For example, memorizing the rules of a language does not lead to linguistic competence. The fact is that children learn language, one of the greatest feats in human learning, from repeated and varied participations in the context of their environments. They develop high levels of communicative competence in whatever the linguistic variation in the contexts in which they learn and use the language.

Testing, however, has been permeated by "minimized" tasks which account for all learning. The general assumptions in psychometrics is that a composite of test items (tasks) account for all the learning that takes place in classrooms (Shepard, 1990). Tests are said to be indicators, basic, and general, and need to be interpreted judiciously by the users. The responsibility therefore lies in the user to be cognizant of the limitations of any test; a sizeable challenge for teachers and the general public who are not and have no reason to be experts in psychometrics (Costa, 1989). In addition, there is danger of reducing the curriculum to the objectives sampled in a test (Madaus, 1983). Such expectations are meager for sound curricular endeavors in societies where literacy and schooling are high priorities.

National trends in literacy instruction, and certainly in Pennsylvania (Lytle & Botel, 1990), promote wholistic approaches to literacy instruction as described by Goodman (1986), Smith (1985), Graves (1983) to name but a few. Schools adopting wholistic approaches are experiencing difficulties in documenting the rich and well-contextualized learning that takes place. So concerned, I began observations in classrooms during language arts instruction. The main goal was to begin

to delineate, with the teachers, assessment instruments and procedures approapriate for whole language instruction.

The Classrooms

Eighteen different elementary and middle school classrooms in four school districts in central Pennsylvania (3 rural and 1 urban) were visited during the language arts instructional period. Time was allocated to later converse with each teacher. Fifteen of the teachers taught one of grades 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, or 8, three were reading specialists and two of them delivered in class programs along with regular classroom teachers. All of the teachers were involved in training and/or implementation of the new language arts framework endorsed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The Pennsylvania Framework for Reading, Writing and Talking Across the Curriculum (Lytle & Botel, 1990) promotes a wholistic approach to literacy.

The first visitation began to disclose an overwhelmingly rich and contextualized instruction which the teachers delivered with high levels of sophistication in knowledge. During the entire visitation period I witnessed a variety of activities such as peer editing of friendly letters, peer writing conferences--in pairs and with the entire group,

sharing books which had been read, students discussing the group play they were going to write and, debating controversial issues. In addition, the richness of the instructional activities were genuine and unstaged. Granted, a visitor in a classroom alters any natural or business-as-usual process. However, when children work in cooperative groups virtually unguided, when in their discussions they make reference to information they have previously researched, ask questions about authors' (peers) purpose in writing a story, use sophisticated questioning to unfold authors' writing ideas, spontaneously discuss the tone of a story, or when a panel of learners makes a presentation on a controversial topic, the activities may be particularly presented for that day, but cannot be solely staged for the day. The procedures unfolded with great ease on the part of the students who soon decided to ignore my presence as I observed or participated in the classroom. Not a single question was heard about group procedures, the whereabouts of dictionaries, or if these could be used when needed. Students pursued their tasks as pros who know their trade and know it well.

In most classrooms observed group composition was heterogeneous, ranging in size from 17 to 26 children. Each classroom had its share of remedial learners,

Chapter I or otherwise. One classroom was composed of all Chapter I learners. Unless indicated by the teacher, I was unable to identify remedial learners or high achievers. All children participated, all were engaged and active, and all were contributing to the task at hand. In retrospect, there were ample opportunities for success in each classroom.

For an example, the one case which may be considered extreme was the classroom with all Chapter I students. The teacher, in this case a reading specialist, delivered services in the regular classroom and had adapted the reading of a tradebook into a read-along activity. She read out loud as the students followed along in their books. As she read, she imparted enthusiasm and suspense to the story and the students eagerly followed along. On that particular day, they were finishing the book. The teacher stopped at breaks in the story and asked prediction questions and inquired about reasonings behind each prediction. She also asked questions requiring students to derive word meanings from the context as well as the content of the story. The students responded accordingly. Since they were near the end of the book, several children, eager to know the outcome, moved ahead to the last page to read the ending. The behaviors of these children as

they interacted with written and oral language were no different from those of children in other classrooms and of mature, proficient readers. In addition, they experienced ample opportunities to participate actively and successfuly.

Recurring Themes

Through hours of observation and conversations with the teachers, a theme which kept recurring was the high levels of performance displayed by the so-called low ability learners when a wholistic approach was used. Teacher after teacher commented that remedial learners were more engaged and interested and made significant contributions to class discussions and activities. In one particular class a student had difficulty working in cooperative groups, mainly in getting along with the other students. This student had chosen to work by herself and sat at a separate table. On the day of observations she decided to rejoin her work group and did so. It seems that one of the things she was learning was that in order to complete her assignment successfully she needed her peers' assistance and input.

Another recurring theme had to do with the inadequacies of report cards. Teachers expressed frustration about reducing children's learning to a letter grade. They had no formal way of documenting and

reporting performance for the rich, well developed and varied activities in which students were engaged and interested. Several teachers mentioned that due to the parental and administrative pressures they felt to assign grades and the lack of "accepted" alternatives, they used the basal reader tests or the skills tasks to determine grades. Meanwhile the rich activities they were implementing occurred undocumented in terms of learners' progress. Some teachers mentioned that they did not grade the products or the processes of the wholistic activities they developed. They either stated that they didn't know how or that did not feel comfortable translating the students' best efforts into a letter grade or score.

A major theme with teachers was how to educate parents and the public about the learning that is occurring in the classroom. Parents and tax payers in general are seriously interested in good education and they also have their own ideologies about sound instruction. Thus, in the teachers' view a process to educate the public is needed to make significant changes in instruction.

Further, several teachers mentioned that other teachers not involved in wholistic instruction viewed the formers' instructional procedures as the easy way

because "the students do all the work." Thus there is need to educate other teachers and administrators as well into the wholistic ways of instruction.

Conclusions

The teachers observed were effectively mediating learning activities so their students could become actively involved and owners of their learning. As I observed, a discomforting thought kept recurring. It related to how little the public knows about the efforts involved in rich classroom curricula. These rich curricula are undocumented because we do not explicitly inform the general public about the highly skilled, sophisticated performances and growth students display through the daily activities they perform. They are unstandardized because there is no handbook with a script for the teachers to repeat back to their students. Further both teachers and students display high levels of interest and engagement in the activities and in learning as well as teaching.

The main reason for a lack of public knowledge seems to be that report cards, tests, media reports, and parents' meetings do not capture that richness. There is no formal outlet to report learners' performance and learning growth to parents, high administration,

decision makers (i.e. legislators) and and the general public, except grades test scores.

Throughout my observation period, activities related to a variety of topics were performed by the students. These specific topics displayed the interests and sophistication of students as well as of the instruction they received. For example, three wishes for third graders ranged from a bubble gum day in school to eliminating the gypsy moth which destroys their trees, a money tree so there would be no poor people, homes for the homeless, and happiness for everyone. I participated in an activity where fifth graders verbally instructed and demonstrated to others, myself included, how to form a paper crane (origami) with precision and ease. The activity was directly related to the book they had just finished reading. Another group of third graders requested to do a readers' theater after they had finished reading a chapter in the tradebook they were reading. Sixth graders discussed the pros and cons of the use of chemical pesticides and third graders discussed the trade of paleontologists as they brainstormed on the contents of the play they were going to write about dinosaurs.

The experiences of these classrooms reinforced for me the notion that the time is appropriate to effect

changes in education where tracking becomes rare and assessment is mainly directed by teachers. External assessment can and should be used as periodic and rough indicators of the general status of education. In reality, teachers are the only ones who are able to contextualize assessments to the instruction they deliver. After all, rich and contextualized instruction cannot be standardized and can only be documented through rich and contextualized assessments.

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